

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 78: Hate Crimes

Guests: Dr. Sachin Pavithran

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Greetings, my friends. Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. It's only the end of May, and I cannot believe we have another 7 months left in 2020. On the upside, I'm really excited about the episodes I have lined up for the rest of the year. Today's episode is about hate crimes with Dr. Sachin Pavithran, the Director of Policy at the Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University. Sachin is also the Chair of the Access Board, an independent federal agency. We talked in October last year about his personal experiences. And please note there will be discussions on hate, hate crimes, racism, racial profiling, police brutality, xenophobia, and violence. Are you ready? Away. We. Go! [electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: Thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

SACHIN PAVITHRAN: Well, thank you for having me. This is great. I'm glad you reached out.

ALICE: I'm really glad that you agreed, and I'm just really curious and would love to learn about your work and just the topic of hate crimes. Because I think this is such a big issue in our community that doesn't get enough attention. So, before we dive in, do you mind if you introduce yourself?

SACHIN: Sure. My name is Sachin Pavithran. I'm originally from India, born in India. I grew up in the United Arab Emirates and then came to the U.S. as a international student and then stuck around. So, yeah, I'm an immigrant, blind person of color that's been living in the U.S. for 20+ years.

ALICE: Great. And can you tell me a little bit about the work you do as the Policy Director at the Centers for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University?

SACHIN: Sure. So, I've been employed at Utah State University for a while now. And my current role, my primary role, is the Director of Policy, where I work with state level legislature, state level legislation and also work in federal level. So, I work with Congress and also state legislature on different policies and laws that impact people with disabilities at large. So, any conversation that happens when it's in the policy space as it impacts people with disabilities, that's my, I'm the liaison for the university. But that doesn't mean I have all the answers. I'm the

person who brings the people with the knowledge or the research or the data to the lawmakers so they can make appropriate decisions.

[mellow R&B music break]

U.S. Access Board

ALICE: So, I first came across you when I was a member of the National Council on Disability many years ago, and we attended a meeting about social media accessibility.

SACHIN: Yeah. So, I was appointed by President Obama. I was fortunate to be appointed by President Obama to the U.S. Access Board. And I was the Chairman of the agency, I think, when I met you. So, the U.S. Access Board is an independent federal agency. The primary role for this federal agency is to write standards that impact all the different environments that we live in. So, if you take, for example, like any buildings you might walk into, what are the things that set standards like the accessible pathway to the building, what's accessible bathrooms, the signage, the Braille signage you see by the doors, all those different technical standards, the Access Board is involved in. One big thing when we talk in the space about web accessibility, Access Board is involved in the Section 508, which requires all federal agencies to make their web content accessible. You know, passenger vessels, pretty much anything you see that has an accessibility piece to it, Access Board has a hand in it. So, a role, like I said, is to write the standards. Then, after we write the standards, the different agencies implement those standards. We don't oversee standards. We just write them, so that it's best practice and then what are the industry maybe should follow it.

One of the last ones we pushed through under the last administration, under the Obama administration, was the Section 508 accessibility refresh and then medical diagnostics, or make medical diagnostic equipment. So, accessibility around those. So, it's a very small agency, but it has a huge footprint around the country. And it's also well-respected around the world for what we do. We get a lot of inquiries from other countries to kind of duplicate the work we are trying to do.

My personal experience as being a blind person and the things I come across, and also in my professional experience, you know, understanding what accessibility guidelines and standards mean. I see the importance of having experts at agencies like the Access Board to give that kinda input. Because it's you know, in order for people like me to be fully included in communities, we need an environment that's going to be accessible and inclusive. And, you know, I'm glad that I have a small role in playing to make that happen.

[mellow R&B music break]

Sachin's stories of hate crimes

ALICE: So, earlier this year, there was a blog post from the Centers for Persons with Disabilities featuring an interview with you about your experience with a hate crime. And I was wondering what prompted you to tell your story. And do you mind sharing that story with our listeners?

SACHIN: Sure. So, the reason that blog post came about is Utah was working, on the state level, they were working on a piece of legislation that wants to include disability as a category under hate crimes. So, that was being floated around during a legislative session in the state. And as a person who has experienced hate crime, and I never really spoke about it to people, you know, few of my friends knew about the few experiences I've had all my life. And when I started talking to the PR person on staff, it just—about this topic, not about me—it all just came

out. And when it came out, and they were surprised. And they was wondering why I haven't ever said anything about it and if I was okay to blog about it. So, yeah, that's how it came about.

So, the story that was, I think there was two stories indicated on the blog. One of them was it happened here, locally, in Logan where I live, Logan, Utah, just not too far away from campus. I was at a bar with friends, just, you know, just hanging. There was four of us, and I was the only non-white person in this group. And I was having conversations, the people I was having, that I was conversing with were three white females. And we were just talking and chatting at the bar, just like anyone does while socializing. All of a sudden, I feel this pull, and I'm pulled off. I'm sitting at a booth, and my back's facing the booth. And all of a sudden, I'm pulled off my seat. My back's like hanging over the back of the booth, and this person is yelling at me. And it all happened so fast, I didn't have much time to even react. Like it, it just happened that quick. And he started yelling racial slurs to me and to the women sitting across from me, but mainly directed towards me. And started yelling it. All I know is I heard a friend of mine come running or coming up to me and pushing this guy away. Then I heard a bottle break. What I found out later is he was almost about to crack that bottle open on my head. If my friend didn't jump in at that very second, that would have broken open on me.

So, like I say, it happened really fast. All of that happened so fast that there was no reaction time. But it absolutely freaked me out. The bar, I don't know whether he's a bartender or the manager came up and, you know, obviously tried to break things up and said something to this individual who was yelling at me. He was with a couple other people, and they were also kinda getting heated up towards the bartender. And they got kicked out. And soon after that happened, the bartender or a manager comes up to me and starts questioning me, asking what I did wrong, which threw me off again when all I was doing was sitting, and this guy just pulled me up. For some reason he, the manager, thought that I might have instigated something. Which made me a little more, I guess, upset that [chuckles] you know, it's like the person who was victimized became the one who was being lectured almost.

Yeah. So, that's one of the incident that was mentioned in the blog. It was a hard one, and I didn't, [sighs] I didn't really talk about it much at all. Like obviously, the people who was there with me saw it, but I didn't even wanna talk to them about it because. I was, I wanna say I was embarrassed also. But I also was shaken up. I had never experienced something like that before, and it just threw me off completely.

ALICE: Yeah. I mean, it must've been incredibly traumatizing and taking you a while to kind of process it. As you mentioned, it happened so fast. It was so violent. And especially the aftermath, in terms of not being believed or being questioned. Which again, kinda just, sometimes when things like that happen, it just really shapes the way you see the world and the way the world sees you. Did it affect the way you see yourself or the way you kinda perceived what you thought society should be?

SACHIN: Initially, like soon after it happened, you know, I went through this process where I just wanted to forget about it. I didn't wanna think about, didn't wanna talk about it. I didn't want anything to do because the whole piece about being embarrassed. But after that, I start going into this phase of being really upset or angry that I didn't do anything about it. And it put—it's hard to describe—it put me in this phase where I was always suspicious how people are perceiving me. You know, being a blind person, I can't, I don't read body language. I can't tell how people are looking at me. 'Cause there's a lot lost in regards to that. And it made me uncomfortable in unknown environments where I wasn't sure if, you know, especially in environments where I'm by myself, and I can't read people. Am I welcome here? You know,

those are kinda the questions I started asking. Do people, are people staring at me? Are people, you know? Is this going to happen again? Those are the kind of questions I kept asking. Like I got over it after a while, but that was a good length of time that I just could not get over the fact that this happened. And I was almost thinking it's going to happen again.

[mellow R&B music break]

Safety and harassment

ALICE: Yeah, I think for a lot of people with disabilities, whether it's an apparent or non-apparent disability, you know, safety is not always a guarantee. And before this incident happened, did you always feel relatively safe and confident in public spaces?

SACHIN: Before this, yeah. I've never had something like this. You get into debates and arguments in certain settings, like in a bar setting. But I'd never felt threatened. You know, have I argued with someone? Yeah, I have. But you have the conversation got heated with people that I just recently met, like in a setting like that. Yeah. But never felt like I would be attacked. You know, I'd never felt that it would be something that would be to a point where, that it could get beyond just verbal argument. So, yeah. I'd never thought about it prior to that. And since then, yeah.

You know, the other story that's on the blog that I mentioned, it never got to this level. But it was soon after 9/11 happened, and I was on campus. And I was walking. I was heading back to my workplace. And this, you know, this individual that just walked by, I knew there was someone approaching me. But there's always people on the sidewalk on campus. But his person just walked by. But as soon as he got pretty close to me, he just yelled out, you know, yelled out another racial slur and basically told me to go back to my country. Obviously, he assumed I was Middle Eastern, and he said things that was very hurtful. Now, could I, did I know who it was? No, I had no idea who that person was. As soon as I got back to my work, I mentioned it to a couple of people. And the only response I got is, "Oh, that's too bad. There are jerks out there."

But there's nothing I could do. I couldn't give a description. There was no way I could report. What would I say? It's this guy came and said this. Well, there's 28,000 students on campus and 3,000 staff and faculty. It could be anyone. It could be someone who doesn't even have anything to do with the university. You know what I'm saying? So, my blindness put me at a disadvantage. And now, I didn't feel threatened, but I felt really upset. And I felt even more upset that I couldn't report it.

ALICE: Yeah. I mean, that's really frustrating. And I think there's a lotta times where there's a cumulative effect, where these kinds of, you know, whether it's harassment or microaggressions or discrimination, just or just outright violence, it's so many times we can't separate it from our disability, our race, our gender and all of our identities. In addition to those two pretty horrible experiences, have you experienced other kind of like subtle or overt forms of bigotry as a disabled man of color?

SACHIN: Over the years, you know, these are two kinda what I highlighted in the blog. There's been a couple of small things that has happened. And I don't know that you can classify it small or big. You know, it depends upon the individual's perspective of what's. You know, a couple examples I'll give you. I was with a friend of mine. This was while I was in college. He's Filipino, and I'm Indian. And we're leaving our friend's house and going back to campus. He was playing loud music while we were driving. And to get to campus, you had to go through this area. There's different ways to get to campus, but the way we went, it's kind of isolated a little bit. All

of a sudden, we get headlights flashing at us, and there was cops telling us to pull over. And we pulled over, and there's a cop car in the front cover, cop car in the back. I can't remember, but I think there was like three cop cars. And we both get pulled out. And the cop pushes both of us to go to the back.

But here, I'm blind, but it was a time when I wasn't using my cane. This was like, I'm still kind of going through the whole identity piece, whether I should show, you know, accept that I'm blind and all that kinda stuff. So, I wasn't using my cane, so there was no way for the cop to know I was blind. But I was saying, "I can't see. I can't tell where you're pointing me to go." He, the cop would not listen, and every time I reach out to my friend, they yell at me. It was just a bizarre and uncomfortable setting, and they just would not listen to anything I had to say. But on top of that, when we asked why you pulled us over, all they said was, "You fit the description of someone we were looking for." Now, they would not ask what the reason was or anything. They just said we both fit the description. And when we, anytime I ask questions, they yell at us. So, finally, they just, well, they went through the truck and pull a bunch of things out, looked for stuff. And then one of the cops came and said something, and they all laughed. Obviously, then when they're leaving, I ask, "Well, what's going on?" You know, "Get in the truck and leave." And that's all. And then they left. So, obviously, they realized we were not the right people.

But again, my blindness played a role. My skin color played a role. You know, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't follow instructions by the cop, and the cop did not wanna listen to me. You know, he thought I was drunk or pretending. So, it was, he was basically pushing me against the truck, like literally slamming me against the side of a truck because I could not find where he was pointing me to go stand.

ALICE: And we all know how deadly these interactions can result, so.

SACHIN: Yeah. You know, you have someone with authority, and you don't wanna say too much or too less. But I was kinda not in a position to really [chuckles] convince also. And my friend was also very shaken up, so he wasn't of any help. And he couldn't help 'cause anytime he tried to help, he get yelled at and pushed back.

[mellow R&B music break]

What's missing in current discourse about disability hate crimes

ALICE: So, touching back on the topic of hate crimes in general, I really do appreciate you sharing your story. And it's not easy for anyone to really talk about experiencing a hate crime. What do you think is missing in the kind of current discourse or coverage about hate crimes, and especially as it relates to people with disabilities?

SACHIN: Well, you know, going back to what I said just a minute ago about the data, you know, we need data, and we need— I know it's hard for people to come out and talk about it. It's not easy, as you take me for example. It took forever for me to disclose something like this. So, I know it's hard, but it is still very important for people to tell their story because that data is critical to really show that this needs to be taken seriously. Now, yeah, Utah passed this legislation to add that into the category list. That's a good first step. So, what happens now? How are people really gonna enforce and really value that? Utah's just one state. You know, there's really, not every state doesn't have some something similar. Federally, we don't have any federal, there's no legislation coming down from the feds that really looks at this the same way.

So, there's a lotta disconnect between states and national level. And then, there's not really much space that really that this is being talked about. I'm a person who's very involved in disability rights and very involved in the disability space. And the fact that I haven't really found a space that this is really being talked about openly and really discussing what's the next step, imagine all the people who are not really involved. You know, we need more opportunity, more spaces to really have this open dialogue that this is a problem. This is not something we can just push to the side. Because, yeah, there's a lot of issues we're dealing with when it comes to disability. But this is a critical piece. And it will not stop happening till some more attention is brought to it. So, yeah, in a policy is one thing, but we need, within the disability community also, I think there needs to be more open dialogue about it because I think there is a disconnect in the disability community where people don't think this does really happen.

ALICE: And I think for some people, it's, like you mentioned earlier about this feeling of embarrassment. Sometimes I think the sense of shame that there's this, is really strong. And that there are people with disabilities who don't want to talk about it because they don't wanna be pitied or seen as weak or seen as vulnerable. And yet, this is gonna continue to happen until people really know the true extent of the impact on so many of us.

SACHIN: Oh yeah, for sure. And we don't want to wait till something major happens. Is mine to the extreme? No. You know, I'm sure there's much worse stories out there that we have no clue of. You know, that's why I think we really need, as a community, as a disability community, we need to create spaces where this can, where people can comfortably start talking. Because once we can have this conversation within our community, then only it's going to go beyond, grow beyond this community to talk about it. 'Cause we need to feel comfortable at least, some of the people that understand us.

ALICE: Well, I think like we talked about earlier, just creating that space is so important. And I think this is my small way of trying to create that space, that I think is a part of a larger effort by a bunch of us, not just one single episode. But hopefully, yeah, once we put it out there, that who knows what kinda effect it might have with somebody else. And if somebody can feel encouraged or if it resonates with somebody, I think that's a big, that's a big reason why we're doing this. And I really do appreciate you being so open and honest about what happened.

SACHIN: Well, I'm glad you reached out, like I said. And I'm glad you found this important enough to make this an episode in your podcast.

ALICE: Thank you so much, Sachin.

Wrap-up

[hip hop plays]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Sachin's work at my website.

The audio producer for this episode is me, Alice Wong. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets! Bye!!!!